

D&D Fiction

Stormwrack Fiction, Part 1

by Joseph D. Carriker, Jr.



Josen stepped off the gangplank, spurred on by the big, tattooed man -- the first mate of the *Deeptide Lady* -- behind him. Josen quickly stepped aside, making way for the burly first mate, who glanced sideways at him as he stepped aboard himself.

"Welcome aboard, lad," the first mate said with a gruff chuckle. "This is the *Deeptide Lady*, and a finer ship you'd be hard-pressed to find. Stay out of the way today, but watch what the others are doing -- you'll be doing it tomorrow. I'll send someone up to teach you the ropes once we're out of harbor, but for now everyone is busy."



Josen nodded and shifted his canvas seabag to his other shoulder. The first mate nodded him towards the staircase that led into the bowels of the ship.

"A bit later, ask one of the crew to show you where to stow your gear -- you don't have a bunk all to yourself, mind, so don't take up any space. The crew on other shifts'll need the room. But your footlocker's your own." With that, the big man clapped Josen on the back and strode away, shouting orders as he went. Josen watched as men scurried to do as the first mate commanded, and mentally reminded himself to salute the big man the next time they spoke.

There was so much to learn.

For the better part of an hour, Josen scurried hither and yon on the main deck, trying to stay one step ahead of the rest of the crew and keep out of their way. Unfortunately, he hadn't quite grasped the workings of the rigging yet, so he couldn't quite tell where someone was going to need to be from one moment to the next. In time, he found himself chased up to the forecastle.

"Out of the way!" hollered a bearded, scarred sailor, and Josen leapt aside, narrowly avoiding being tripped -- or worse -- by a length of rope that was suddenly stretched taut. Josen scrambled atop one of the piles of coiled rope stored in the nose of the forecastle, at the base of the figurehead. He sat down heavily in the jumble of canvas and rope, and sighed.

"Hoi! Watch it!" squeaked his new seat, and Josen lurched to his feet. A small, brown hand emerged from the pile, and shoved the canvas -- and Josen's bag -- aside. Josen blinked as a small bearded man emerged. No, not a man.

A gnome.

"Sorry," Josen mumbled, lending a hand to help the gnome up. "I... I didn't see you there." The gnome glared up at him, but his face softened when he saw the young man, who looked quite harried and confused.

"There, now. No harm done," the gnome said, righting himself and tossing the boy his bag. "I say, I've done much greater harm to my own head than you've managed to far. So that's something!" Josen smiled, and the gnome looked about, rubbing sleep from his eyes. "Ah, we're under way. Excellent."

Josen looked the gnome up and down. He was wearing plain canvas pants like so many other sailors, but his shirt was dyed a blue that had probably once been the color of the deep ocean before the sun had faded it. He also wore a leather vest with all sorts of small pockets, buckles and straps. The gnome plopped himself down on the edge of a coil of rope and smiled at the boy.

"New here, then?"

"I am, yes. The first mate took me on; I was working for my aunt at the Crook'd Anchor, in town, and he took a room there. When I learned he was a first mate of a ship, I asked him if he needed another hand. He thought it over for a bit, and here I am," Josen finished with a somewhat dismal tone, clearly questioning his decision. "I've tried to stay out of the way like he told me, only..."

"You don't know where to stand?" the gnome asked with a grin. Josen nodded miserably. "Bah! Nothing to it. Stick with me, youngling. I'll show you what's what. What's your name?"

"Josen Malkin," he said, shaking the gnome's hand.

"Farhan Waveglimmer," the gnome said cheerily. He looked about at the sailors scurrying around them, and then down at the brown water, which had begun to move quickly past them as the *Deeptide Lady* made her way for the mouth of the harbor. "Beautiful day. Highly auspicious beginning to a journey, young Josen. See the way the sun sparkles, even on that muddy harbor water? See how it shatters on the waves, looking like gold just beneath the surface?"

Josen smiled and leaned against the railing, peering over the edge with Farhan, whose longish, braided hair was whipping in the wind.

"That means there's gold ahead of us, boy," the gnome said, as though it were the plainest thing in the world. "Riches ahead of us, and wealth for everyone."

"How do you know that?" Josen asked, settling with his back to the railing.

"When you've been on as many sea voyages as I have, youngling, you'll recognize these signs," the gnome assured him. "Or, you can take the smart route, and just listen and learn from old Farhan. Benefit from my experience, boy, and you'll reap the rewards of it without having to take the lumps that came of learning it." He chuckled and stood, as a sailor dressed only in canvas pants, with a shaved head made his way over to them.

"Farhan!" the sailor shouted over the furor of the men working around him. "Get up into that nest -- we need a fair wind if we want to get out of the harbor by nightfall."

Farhan saluted him, and the man strode off. Josen slumped as Farhan leapt out of the coils of rope. He'd hoped

to talk with the gnome a bit more. Farhan started to walk towards the main deck and then stopped halfway, looking back to the coils.

"Well?" he shouted back at Josen. "You coming, or not?" Josen nearly pitched himself face-first onto the rocking deck, scrambling out of the ropes. He caught himself, though, and soon was following in Farhan's footsteps. The gnome was a quick walker, and -- as it turned out -- a quick climber, too. Josen had to scramble to both keep up with him and dodge the working rigging-men and their ropes. Halfway to the top, Farhan called down to the boy and chuckled.

"Hope you aren't afraid of heights, lad," he said, and resumed climbing. Josen paused for a second and looked around. He was quite high in the air by now, and the deck seemed very small below him. It also rocked terribly -- or rather, every time the deck rocked, the mast he was climbing swayed dangerously.

"No, no, don't look down, you ninny-skull," the gnomes squeaky voice warned from higher up. "Never look down!" Josen gulped and kept climbing.

In no time, they were in the crow's nest. Farhan was standing on his tiptoes, peering over the edge of the railing when Josen pulled himself into the small round space, and hugged the bottom of it.

"So... so, why are we here?" he asked, still panting as much from fear as from the exertion of the climb. Farhan winked at him and dug in the pouch at his side. His hand came back up, and he showed Josen the slide whistle in his small fist.

"To whistle up a wind, of course," the gnome winked, and laughed, and put the whistle to his lips. His cheeks puffed out, and his hand played the slide cleverly as he began to play a cheery jig. Cheers sounded from the rigging below them as the sailors found something to speed their time.

As Josen watched the gnome play a merry tune, something strange happened. At first, he couldn't quite figure out what, until Josen noticed the gnome's braid -- it hung straight when they first arrived in the crow's nest, but now it was whipping forward in a sudden wind that sprung up. Josen looked down just in time to see the sails go from slack to crisply full, capturing the suddenly advantageous winds with a snap of canvas.

"Windcaller! " came the cheer of the rigging men from below them, their jobs suddenly made much, much easier - it was easy work to maneuver sails to capture a wind that came in from behind, after all. As the piping continued, the gnome winked merrily at Josen, who began clapping in time to the music.

New Feats: Windsinger

You can use song or a wind instrument to compel the winds to obey you. The bard who possesses this feat is highly favored aboard a sailing vessel; indeed, a bard who demonstrates the ability to control the wind to some degree is usually given an officer's position aboard ship.

Prerequisites: Bardic music class feature, Perform (sing or wind instruments) 5 ranks.

Benefit: By expending a daily bardic music use, you can lull the winds around a single ship into well-tamed gusts. They continue to blow into the sails of the ship as normal for their speed, but their effects on the crew are one stage in intensity less (see Table 1--2 on page 23 of *Stormwrack*). Thus, a strong wind affected by this ability continues to propel the ship along as normal for a strong wind, but it only affects the crew as though it were a moderate wind.

You can also alter the direction of the wind by one compass point (from north to north-west or north-east, from south-west to west or south, etc.).

These effects last as long as the bard continues to perform his bardic music, plus 10 rounds after the music has ended.

"That was amazing," Josen said, as he sat down next to Farhan, handing the gnome a bowl of stew that was the crew's dinner. Farhan chuckled and handed the lad a hunk of bread.

"Ah, it's just the wind, boy," he said, dipping bread to stew and chewing happily. "Useful trick, though, I will say. Why, it saved the *Deeptide Lady* more than once, after all."

"Did it?" Josen asked. "How so?"

"You boys remember the caller from the deeps out by the Rivensail Shoal?" the gnome called out, and a few of the sailors cried their assent. Others moved closer, eager for the tale to be told.

Well, lad. The ocean is deep. Very, very deep. There are some places that are deeper than the tallest mountain is high. And these black places are hungry -- they eat everything that falls into them: corpses, ships... even light. But sometimes the blackness gets greedy and gluttonous. Impatient. And it doesn't want to wait for these things to fall down into its maw.

When that happens, the abysses come hunting.

We were sailing just off the Rivensail Shoal, a reef maybe a week from the nearest port. Well, in the middle of this shoal, there was a pit; a pit of deep, black water, cold as winter and hungrier than a starving wolf. Of course, we didn't know that then.

I was up on deck, up near the *Lady* at the head of the ship, where you and I met this morning. Now, I was watching the birds that float there on the waters, birds of all different kinds. I was about to turn away when I saw something dark move underneath them. Looked like a big thing, too, so I called out to them.

"Hey!" says I, in bird-speak. "Look out below!" Just then, one of the birds, a pretty thing with bright blue and creamy white plumage, gave a squawk and shot under the water! Well, you can bet between me yelling my fool head off and their friend disappearing, those birds lit out of there so fast, they left in a cloud of feathers.



And in good time, too, because these tentacles come slashing up out of the water, snatching after them. But it was too late -- those black arms got only coils full of their feathers. A big squid, I figure, until we get a bit closer. I realized then that those tentacles weren't from some rubbery sea-beast -- they were water itself. Deep, black, shadowy water.

Next thing I know, Jakes, Marlan and Ol' Crimmer have leaped overboard, whooping like they were headed for a shore full of alehouses with a bag full of gold each! Lured overboard... Well, those tentacles lashed out and snatched them up right quick as you can imagine. I can still see the stupid grins on their faces -- gods rest their souls -- as they sank beneath the water.

So, I start shouting an alarm. Now, I knew I could do something about sirens and the like, you bet, but this time there weren't no song -- at least, no song that we could hear. Instead I start telling everyone to get away from the railing, that there's a beast there, and I run like the dickens for the main mast.

Then, things went from bad to crazed. See, a caller from the deeps can lure men down into their tentacles. But when people wise up to them, the caller is forced to use other tactics. And just like they can summon men to them, they can also summon strange manner of ocean creatures. Including, figments of the ocean's very element. So, in a flash, a horrible, watery figure crawls out from beneath the waves, splashing its way up the side of the ship.

Needless to say, I start playing a windsong then, filling the sails like we were outrunning a storm! The captain and that nasty cutlass of his start dealing with the water elemental on deck, before it can hurt too many of the crew, but Tuldin over there still has the scars on his shoulder. Show the boy, Tuldin!

Wicked beastly, aren't they?

Thankfully, one of the passengers was some kind of mage or other, and she shows up on deck, looks around, sizes up the situation, and then drops a fireball or two down on that old caller from the deeps.

Now, to this day I maintain that there are precious few problems that a fireball to the gullet won't solve, and this proved no different. That old caller didn't like a mouth full of flame, let me tell you. You could hear it shriek like mad, but by that time, the winds had built up, and we were out of there faster than it could follow, by gum.

New Monster: Caller From the Deep

An inky blot of cold black water, this horrific tentacled mass ripples and seethes in the water.

In the deep, black places of the ocean, strange things come to rest. Corpses, cast-offs magics, even light itself is pulled into these places and consumed. Little wonder then that sometimes, in such places, a malevolence grows. Impelled by the rot of the things of the light and driven by a horrible hunger, this thing becomes impatient waiting for the tides of the sea to pull the world above it down into its ravenous maw. It forms for itself a body out of the black, cold waters where it found its genesis and leaves the blackwater trenches of the deep oceans, seeking life and light to consume.

A caller from the deeps has the ability to call things to itself, so that it can consume them. It often lures sailors overboard with its call, enwrapping them as they leap into the cold water and feeding on their life's warmth. When endangered, a caller from the deeps has the ability to summon aquatic creatures to defend it.

Combat

A caller from the deeps maintains a very simple technique for hunting. It begins by calling its prey to itself, using *siren's call*. It then grapples those who enter the water, drowning them. Should any manage to put up enough of a fight to endanger its serenity, it summons a creature to defend itself and distract any adversaries. Only if its opponents fight their way past this summoned minion or manage to directly engage the caller itself will this creature focus its full attention and might on them.

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